

Plaza Del Cerro
(Plaza de San Buenaventura)
State Routes 76 and 4 vicinity
Chimayo
Rio Arriba County
New Mexico

HABS No. NM-128

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PLAZA DEL CERRO
(Plaza de San Buenaventura)

HABS No. NM-128

Location: Southwest of the intersection of State Routes 76 and 4,
Chimayo, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico.

Historical Context: Originally known as the Plaza de San Buenaventura, the Plaza Del Cerro (Courtyard of the Hill) is named for the Oratorio de San Buenaventura (Chapel of Saint Bonaventure) which is located on the west side of the plaza. The plaza is an example of the fortified colonial plaza plan.

Plaza Del Cerro was built in a square enclosed by contiguous adobe buildings. Entrance into the plaza was through two or possibly three alleys; one on the south side of the plaza and one or two on the north. The passageways were wide enough to admit only animals and people on foot, and were therefore easily defended. An original watchtower or torreón still stands today enclosed within a house on the outside on the south side (Ortega, interview). The Acequia Madre or main irrigation ditch runs through the plaza and was used to irrigate the once communal land of the plaza. The earliest records of the founding of Chimayo go back to 1701 in the form of a reference to "Puesto de Chimayo" (Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Reel No. 60, Frame No. 225). There are also records of land deeds and disputes which go back to 1714. The settlement may have begun as much as two decades earlier (Circa 1690). Documents, in the hands of private owners, attest to the fact that Chimayo was founded on the orders of DeVargas in 1696 (Ortega interview). The first clear references to "el paraje de Chimayo" (the site of Chimayo) were made in 1740, at which time it is thought the plaza was built as an enclosed entity. No records, however, are known which give the date of its construction.

A will was written in 1752 at "San Buenaventura de Chimayo"; and the earliest existing marriage record of a couple who were residents of "el puesto de San Buenaventura de Chimallo" was made by Fray Andres Garcia at Santa Cruz church on September 1, 1767 (Boyd, State Planning Office Files). In 1776, Fray Atansio Dominguez visited the Plaza and wrote a report on the New Mexico Missions. He noted that Chimayo was "a large settlement of many ranches with good lands and more orchards than there are at la Villa de La Canada." At that time the Plaza was inhabited by seventy-one families and three-hundred sixty-seven individuals.

Throughout the eighteenth century, persons convicted of crimes of violence were exiled to Chimayo for fixed periods of time; Chimayo being considered the eastern boundary or frontier of the Spanish settlements in the Rio Grande Valley proper.

Between 1813-1816, the Santuario de Nuestro Senor de Esquipulas was built; about two miles down the road from the plaza. The number of pilgrims which the Santuario attracted stimulated business in Chimayo itself. Goods in Chimayo were offered for sale to the pilgrims and included sarapes,

saddleblankets, rebosos and knitted wool stockings, made by local consigners. In the 1860s, the chapel of the Santo Nino was built just west of the Santuario, bringing even more pilgrims to the general area.

Prior to the completion of the Santa Fe to Taos highway in 1917, which followed the Rio Grande Canyon, travel from Santa Fe to Taos was along the Chimayo-Truchas-Penasco route; making Chimayo a stop on this major road which ran through the plaza (Boyd, Ortega interview). After 1945, the road was re-routed, causing partial abandonment of the plaza.

Around 1900, commercial dealers from Santa Fe and Albuquerque introduced commercial looms and yarns to the Chimayo weavers. Weaving has been going on in Chimayo since its founding (Ortega interview). The new increased method of production kept the Chimayo community prosperous until the Great Depression of the 1930s, and helps explain the variety of architectural styles visible in the plaza.

Supplemental Material:

The following is an interview with David Ortega of Chimayo, New Mexico, conducted in September, 1975 by HABS historian Nelson Arroyo-Ortiz.

Mr. Ortega is a seventh-generation resident of Chimayo who was born (1917) and raised in Chimayo. He told me that he has original documents that show an order from DeVargas to establish the town of Chimayo in 1696. He could not find these papers but assured me that he had them. However, Mr. Ortega did show me some original documents dating from 1786, 1790, 1791 and 1847. The documents seemed to be about various land disputes, one was entitled "Territorio Del Nuevo Mejico Condado de Rio Arriba." He said that there are many more original documents in possession of his relatives. When I questioned Mr. Ortega about the existence of a torreon or watchtown he told me that there is indeed a torreon on the south outside wall of the plaza. The torreon is enclosed within the property of one of his relatives. The dirt road to Truchas, which goes through the plaza, is the original old road. The road was re-routed past the plaza sometime around 1945.

I asked Mr. Ortega when Chimayo became famous for its weaving. The first "real" publicity for Chimayo weaving was the result of a magazine article which appeared in 1953. However, Mr. Ortega pointed out that his family have been weavers in Chimayo since its founding. He showed me a weaving which had patterns made with indigo dye. He said it was at least two hundred years old. Mr. Ortega expressed the hope that someone would study his documents and do research on Chimayo.

Prepared by: Nelson Arroyo-Ortiz
HABS Historian
September 1975

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For further information:

Borhegyi, Stephen F. El Santuario De Chimayo. Santa Fe: Spanish Colonial Arts Society, 1936.

National Register of Historic Places, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. National Register Inventory-Nomination Form for Plaza Del Cerro (Plaza de San Buenaventura), 1971. A microfiche of this form is available for public use in the National Register office.

State of New Mexico, Historic Preservation Division, 228 E. Palace Avenue, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503. Application form for the Oratorio of San Buenaventura (Plaza Del Cerro), for inclusion in the state register of historic places.

For more available written material on the Plaza Del Cerro and related subjects, see the bibliography in "Spanish-American Villages of the Pecos River Valley", HABS No. NM-131.

PROJECT INFORMATION

This report is part of the 1975 Pecos River Valley, New Mexico project undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the New Mexico State Planning Office. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, this report was written by Nelson Arroyo-Ortiz (Cornell University), the project historian. Susan McCown, a HABS architectural historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the report in 1983 for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress.